

ROUND TABLE DISCUSSES "LACK OF CONFIDENCE"

In an effort to "resolve the lack of confidence" expressed by some in the Executive Committee elected by the 18th General Assembly (see KNL 89, Dec. 1974), Moderator Isuke Toda convened a kondankai (round table) for Executive Committee members, problem posers, members of the 18th General Assembly preparations committee, and district moderators on January 13-14, in advance of the first meeting of the Executive Committee, required by the Constitution to be held in February.

The "lack of confidence" appears to reflect the desire of various people--for various motives--to "open up" administrative procedures, and their fear that this Executive Committee will assume authority without being properly critical of the former Executive Committee's actions and without taking steps to avoid what they feel were its "errors."

One voice was that of Kuniaki Sugawara, who called for a freezing of all officer and executive functions and the convening of the 19th General Assembly because the election did not produce a "box" for him and other "minority" voices. Another voice was that of Shinzo Yamane from Nishi-Chugoku district, who questions whether the committee will give due consideration to all sides in the debate over the two-stage ministerial orders* or will proceed to recognize those qualifying for ordination--which he is protesting. The Rev. Yoichi Kishimoto (an Executive Committee member) said that because this General Assembly was predicated on the inclusion of problem posers and on the dialog process, the Executive Committee members elected by it must likewise conduct themselves in this spirit.

On the other hand, the Rev. Rinzo Washiyama, the Rev. Yoichiro Saeki and others called for the organization of the Executive Committee in accord with the Constitution and Bylaws, Washiyama stating that if the results of the election shook the confidence of some, it restored the confidence of others.

Discussion was often heated, direct, frank, humorous. Lay members elected to the Executive Committee produced some new notes: the demand for people to speak so all could understand; the fact that laymen too have ideas on ministerial orders and other issues; the cost of such meetings; the sacred nature of responsibilities invested in the Executive Committee to be undertaken prayerfully, as entrusted by God.

As the hour of adjournment drew near and no resolution was in sight, feelings became more taut. The offer of "observer" status at Executive Committee meetings was rejected as insufficient. The Rev. Tsuji suggested freezing all activities for four or five years, returning responsibility to the districts.

Finally, Toda declared that it is essential for the Executive Committee to meet to carry on the affairs of the Kyodan and said he would do his best to convene it in February.

*The issue of ministerial orders, including the approval of those awaiting ordination, was to have been taken up by the 18th General Assembly but time ran out before it could be debated. It is a pressing issue, with churches waiting for the ordination of their young pastors so they can perform the sacraments, but other pastors refusing ordination until the difference in status of the licentiate and the ordained minister can be resolved.

REVERENCE FOR LIFE

You are sitting in the small office talking to the pastor, who is also the kindergarten superintendent, when a little child runs in, brushes by, climbs up on a chair and begins to bang the metal cabinet door against the side of a metal file. Once. Twice. Three times. The pastor winces at the noise but continues talking. Eventually the child stops banging the door, whisks out the door.

"Autistic* children," explains the Rev. Yukio Saeki, "have a tendency to repeat certain actions again and again and again. This is a new child in the kindergarten. Most of them, when they first enter, begin by banging that door or pulling out all the drawers in the desk."

Suginami Church Kindergarten now has 15 autistic children integrated into five classes of 150 students.

Autism was first identified as a condition different from brain injury or mental retardation about 15 years ago. Even now little is known about it except that it is a condition in which a child lives completely closed up within himself, with no relationship to the outside. Characteristics include repetitive actions, the lack of speech or other communication, the absence of any kind of relationships.

Medical science also has very little knowledge of treatment. Counseling, therapy, treatment centers are available but what is felt to be most important is a setting in which the child will have an opportunity to develop relationships.

Providing Opportunities

Recently various counselling, health and treatment agencies have called on kindergartens to accept autistic children, but very few have responded, not having the confidence that they can deal with all that is involved: the highly disruptive behavior; the time, patience and special understanding required; the responsibility; the reaction of other parents.

Suginami Church Kindergarten had been accepting from three to five children each year since its first experience with K-chan in 1968. In 1972, recognizing the importance of this kind

*Saeki prefers the use of the term *jiheiteki keiko o motsu* - children with a tendency toward autism, in Japanese.

of program and having some confidence on the basis of past experience, it decided to take in 15 autistic children each year.

The staff now includes eight teachers, one for each of the five classes, and three teachers free to respond to the needs of the autistic children--keeping them from danger (autistic children have 3 times as many accidents as other children), serving as a bridge between them and their classes, providing play therapy.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Saeki teach in the kindergarten. Several of the other teachers have training in special education.

The extent to which a child's emotional and social development can be restored varies. Nine children who have graduated from the kindergarten are now attending regular elementary schools.

Change is slow, measured in months and years. There are long periods of individual activity with no relationship to others at all. But eventually the child may, in some small way acknowledge an activity of the group, utter a sound, reflect, in a brightened expression, some breakthrough.

In response to the child's needs, the kindergarten follows a policy of complete permissiveness, trying never to cut off or block the activity of the autistic child, whether it be the banging that gives a sense of security, or exploratory activity that may go as far as jumping out the low first floor window. At the same time, the opportunity is always held open for relationships to develop in the world of children, where communication of a special kind takes place.

How do other children relate to the autistic children? In most cases they learn to accept them and their behavior, noticing and rejoicing when one makes a move to enter the circle, draws a picture or begins to answer questions.

When someone criticized one child's way of eating his lunch, another child defended him, saying, "F-chan is eating in F-chan's way."

Parents of non-autistic children sometimes worry about the effect of autistic



Rev. Saeki is 43 years old and a graduate of Doshisha School of Theology, where he completed the graduate course in 1956.

tic children on their own children, but Saeki emphasizes the importance of their learning to live with all members of the human family. To the question, "What if my child imitates their behavior?" Saeki responds, "Only if your child has anxieties will he imitate it...he knows it is not appropriate for him."

"Our experience with these children has changed our whole educational value system," says Saeki. "We came to see that education has been something imposed by teachers on children rather than a nurturing or drawing out of what is in children--a freeing of the child. Now our program for the whole kindergarten revolves around the philosophy of 'free education,' the discovery by children and teachers together of how to live and grow, recognizing and providing for a variety of personalities."



But such a philosophy is still a difficult one for many parents in education-conscious Japan, who do not believe that learning can take place through play.

A Free Atmosphere

Walking through the church building and the adjoining two-story concrete kindergarten building, built in 1972, one senses the "freedom." Some children ride wide rubber-tired cars over the old wooden floor of the sanctuary, its Sunday benches piled along the wall. In first floor rooms children are drawing, making airplanes, playing a jump rope game of their own devising.

In the yard, one group is trying, with the teacher, to launch a plastic kite. A girl waves from the top of a real, live, 3-story high climbing tree. On the roof, four children are having a foot race, while another leans quietly against the high fence.

On the balcony sits a child, curled up, rubbing his finger continuously in a circular motion. Saeki pats his head. "His autistic condition developed at the age of two," he says, "Sometime he may speak...."

Another child carries an empty cookie-box. "Is this a cookie?" Saeki asks him, pointing to the picture. "Is this a cookie?" the child repeats. "When he

does not repeat what I say but makes a different response, we will know he is beginning to communicate."

The kindergarten has also accepted children with mental retardation, feeling the importance of caring for every human life.

The Church and the Kindergarten

How does Suginami Church relate to the kindergarten? Since the new program was undertaken, the members' understanding of the significance of the kindergarten's work--and its difficulties--has grown, particularly because Saeki appealed to the church to undertake the payment of his salary and help raise funds for the new building.

Several parents with autistic children are now attending church. They have found that the personal change required in their lives in order to provide the right environment for their children is a religious problem.

The question often first arises with the mother, who goes with the child to kindergarten every day, but eventually the father too becomes involved.

The patience of other church members may sometimes be tried by the child who sits on the lectern during the service, or blows out all the candles during the Christmas candlelight service. On these and other occasions, the trials, the hopes, the requests born of the kindergarten experience make their way into Saeki's sermons.

One of the many kindergarten tasks still is to be taken up is the "off campus" one of counseling the parents. "This is my pastoral work," Saeki says.

Saeki sees the responsibility of the kindergarten and of society in general on two levels: one, to prepare children with special problems to enter society; the other, to prepare society, beginning with the children, to accept and enable the life of all human beings.

Saeki feels Christian kindergartens must increasingly take up this kind of education instead of being known as "good" kindergartens serving the "elite" of the total society.

The fact that each year Suginami Church Kindergarten receives 100 applications for the 15 openings in its program of integrated education reflects the need. Necessary, too, is the affirmation of the value of the life of each human being.

THE YASUKUNI STRUGGLE--seen from the national and the local level

A continuing frontline for Japanese Christians is the fight to prevent nationalization of the Yasukuni Shrine to the War Dead in Tokyo. Last year the nationalization bill was forced through the Lower House of the Diet, but it died without being taken up in the Upper House, in the midst of wide reactions against the procedures used to achieve its passage.

The Diet will be reconvened on January 24. According to the January 10 Yasukuni News (No. 9), the activity of Diet members and others supporting the bill has begun, but it appears that there is no intention of introducing it at the beginning of this Diet session.

The News quotes a government source, reported in the January 15 Tokyo Shimbun, to the effect that, in view of the balance of power resulting from the fall elections for the Upper House [in which the Liberal Democratic Party lost seats], there is a hesitancy to introduce the bill. However, warns the News, this kind of report may result in stimulating the bill's supporters to multiply their efforts; thus it calls for a postcard campaign to ward off any campaign that might develop.

Local Councils and Shrines

Meanwhile recent efforts to knit together local councils and shrines have become the focus of the anti-Yasukuni Shrine Bill movement that sees in them efforts to erode the separation of state and religion at the local level.

Mrs. Eiko Nomura is a 36-year-old housewife, member of the Kita Hassamu Preaching Point, and chairman of a Hokkaido Council of Christian Groups Opposing the Yasukuni Shrine Bill. In the following excerpts from her article in the January 16 issue of Hatarakuhito, "Hard to Uproot," one sees the patience and determination of a Christian seeking to witness to the meaning of her faith in her local setting:

It may be different in suburban housing developments around the big cities, but in the case of local areas, the connection between the local council and the shrine is very hard to deal with. . . . If you challenge it directly, saying, "Isn't it against the Constitution for the local council to contribute to a shrine that is a definite religion?" invariably the response is "Yes, what you say is true but. . . ." followed by "That shrine has protected us since the town was established. . . ." or "That's all right, isn't it? (You're one of us so you shouldn't get uptight about it. . . just come along with the rest of us.)"

No matter how much one goes on about human rights and personal freedom, the discussion never gets into that arena. Finally you say, "I'm not going to win in this arena. I'll move over into theirs."

Rationalism is kept at a respectful distance; sympathy is welcomed. Somehow what people like is for the talk always to be of one feeling. All lined up. One family together, one town together, company employees together, the citizenry all together. People feel a sense of security if all are together. The mere existence of a different opinion creates feelings of anxiety and strain and creates a dilemma. It is this characteristic that underlies the Nationalization of Yasukuni and was the root for the General Mobilization in 1940. Therefore, until this attitude is uprooted, the Yasukuni bill will continue to come up. . . . Uprooting it is very tedious, painstaking work that does not necessarily bear fruit every time.

Our fight should continue to the point that the elders of the local council agree that it is better both for the Council and the shrine for people to make their contributions individually.

I always intend to carry this effort on with the local council and the war bereaved but I've not been very successful at it. At first I entered the ring reluctantly, but as I have patiently carried on the struggle, both my opponent and I have been changed.